



# Endangered Species of the Everglades



*The Florida panther is one of the most endangered large mammals in the world. Today it is estimated there are less than 90 in South Florida. Photo: Deborah Jansen*



*A medium sized raptor, the snail kite's diet consists almost entirely of apple snails. Its critical habitat is the western shores of Lake Okeechobee and Water Conservation Areas 1, 2, and 3A. Photo: USFWS*

*A major role of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in South Florida is the administration of the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (ESA). Regarded by many as one of the most comprehensive wildlife conservation laws in the world, the ESA is also a complex law to manage and enforce.*

*Within the 14-county area of the Everglades there are 22 federally endangered and threatened species; 16 are on the endangered list—four birds, five reptiles and plants, the manatee and the Florida panther.*

*The Service's South Florida Ecological Services Office's goal for the endangered and threatened species is simply recovery. To protect, enhance and manage the species to the point where they no longer need protection.*

*This recovery program determines the distribution of the various species throughout their habitat, and then establishes procedures to protect and enhance the species populations. Scientists conduct research on the biology and ecology of the species while monitoring the populations. As part of the overall effort, the Vero Beach Office then proceeds to keep the general public and specific stakeholders informed of the current status of the species and its prognosis. Paramount to any recovery program is our interface with the public.*

## **Among the endangered species of the Everglades are two mammals, the Florida panther and the West Indian manatee.**

- The Florida panther is one of the most endangered large mammals in the world. It is also Florida's state animal. A small population in South Florida represents the only known remaining wild population of an animal that once ranged throughout most of the southeastern United States.
- The West Indian manatee ranges throughout the State of Florida but annually seeks the warmer waters of central and south Florida. In the first four years of this century (2000-2003) more than 1,200 manatees have died as a result of a number of causes. Specific initiatives have been undertaken to stem that death rate. As of January 2003, the Florida Marine Research Institute estimates the manatee population at more than 3,000.

## **There are four birds on the endangered species list within the Everglades, the Everglade snail kite, the Cape Sable seaside sparrow, the red-cockaded woodpecker and the wood stork.**

- The Everglade snail kite is threatened primarily by habitat loss and destruction. It has a presence in North Florida but is primarily found within the Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge, Conservation Areas 2, 2A, 3 and 3B and the Everglades National Park. It is threatened primarily by loss of habitat, developmental encroachment and loss of food supply due to pesticides. Most recent counts indicate a population of less than 1,500.
- The Cape Sable seaside sparrow is a non-migratory resident of freshwater to brackish marshes. Changes in habitat that have occurred as a result of the changes in distribution and quality of water flows in South Florida continue to threaten the subspecies with extinction.



Wood storks. Photo: USFWS

- The status of red-cockaded woodpeckers and associated recovery efforts has improved significantly during the past decade. The Service fully expects this success story to continue and increase in momentum. The primary causes for the species decline is loss of habitat. While at one time the number of this species exceeded a million, today there are less than 15,000, considerably less than necessary for a viable population.
- Large, long-legged wading birds, the wood storks are birds of freshwater and brackish wetlands, primarily nesting in cypress or mangrove swamps. The current population of adult birds is difficult to estimate, since not all birds nest each year. Presently, the wood stork population is believed to number 11,000 adults.

**Five reptiles of the Everglades are on the endangered species list; the American crocodile and the Green, Hawksbill, Kemp's and leatherback sea turtles.**

- The American crocodile, unlike its cousin the alligator, inhabits mostly salt or brackish water and is found on three FWS National Wildlife Refuges in South Florida; J.N. "Ding" Darling, Ten Thousand Islands and Crocodile Lake. They are mostly a timid species and especially wary of humans. A turn of the century population count estimated as many as 1,000 animals. Although several threats to the 'croc' still exist, its population status has improved greatly.
- Sea turtles are among the largest living reptiles. They have scales, are cold-blooded, air breathing and lay their eggs on land. Of the seven sea turtle species, five are found within the Everglades. Highly migratory, the sea turtles will easily use the waters of several nations in their lifetime. Because sea turtles are shared resources, conservation efforts for turtle populations in one country may be jeopardized by activities in another. Cooperation among nations is critical to ensure the survival of sea turtles.

**Five plants found in the Everglades are listed as endangered. They are crenulate lead-plant, deltoid spurge, Okeechobee gourd, Small's milkpea and tiny polygala.**

- Three of the plants are located exclusively in Miami-Dade County; the crenulate lead-plant, the deltoid spurge and the Small's milkpea. The lead-plant is a perennial shrub that grows to three-feet in height. The spurge is a low-growing perennial herb, primarily threatened by urban expansion while the milkpea is a small trifoliate perennial legume; like the lead-plant it is threatened by exotic plant invasions and habitat loss.
- Found mostly in Palm Beach and Glades counties, within the dikes of Lake Okeechobee, the Okeechobee gourd is a high-climbing vine and is threatened by water management practices associated with the Lake.
- The tiny polygala is an erect, short-lived herb found along the South Florida coast from St. Lucie to Miami-Dade County. Most plants germinate and die within one year. Like so many plants it is threatened by urban development and exotic plant infestation.

**For more information, contact**

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Green sea turtle. Photo: USFWS



*The Okeechobee Gourd, a high-climbing vine, is one of five endangered plants within the Everglades. Photo: USFWS*